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AUTHOR	Bloxom, Joan; Bernes, Kerry
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ABSTRACT

The student needs assessment in this study allows a unique insight into the availability, delivery, and effectiveness of high school career programs. The research provides data from a 19-item, Comprehensive Career Needs Survey, administered to 888, Southern Alberta grade 12 students. The students value career plans and the resources, both people and informational, to support transitions. These students voice the need to have passion for career and report a wide range of occupational choices. The majority report post-secondary education or training plans. High school career development resources are available but the efficacy data suggest the services are not as effective as students would like them to be. The results of this study have implications for the delivery of high school career programs and the development of the public policy on career services. (Contains 17 references.) (Author)

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What They Need: Delivery of Career Development to Grade 12 Students

Joan Bloxom B.HEc, Ed Dip
Education Graduate Student
University of Lethbridge
Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada

Kerry Bernes, Ph.D., C.Psych.
Associate Professor of Educational and Counselling Psychology
University of Lethbridge
Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada

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Introduction

The objective of this study was to explore the career needs of grade 12 students. This needs assessment placed a priority on obtaining information from students with regards to their career needs.

Method

This study is based on data from a much larger study, The Comprehensive Career Needs Survey (CCNS) [Magnusson and Bernes, 2001].

Sample and Questionnaire

The CCNS High School Form is a self-report measure and the instrument was administered to senior high students, Grades 10 through 12, during classroom periods. The CCNS asked students questions in a 19-item questionnaire, containing 3 subscales grouped into three categories: General Information, Career Plans, and Career Help. The questionnaire design allowed for the examination of multiple factors linked to career needs. Both quantitative and qualitative data analysis were used in this study. The present study focuses on the collected data for the 888 grade 12 students who completed the survey.

Data Analysis

Career plans and career help were assessed by single response questions, categorical response questions, rating scales, and Likert rating scales. Descriptive statistics (frequency counts and percentages) are reported and for the Likert items, the rank ordered mean scores and standard deviations are reported to represent the priority of needs. Many of the questions also provided for open-ended response.

This study used 225 of the 888 surveys (25 % of the overall sample) in the qualitative analysis. The surveys selected were representative of all the school populations and the school communities that participated in the study. A coding taxonomy was derived from a content analyses of the open-ended questions. The themes were coded and the frequency and percentage of each coded theme was calculated.

Results

The results of the CCNS are presented in two sections; career plans and career help.

Career Plans

Career plans reports on the stage of decision-making for grade 12 students in regard to their career plans, specific post-secondary plans, choice of occupation given proper education or training, reasons for occupational choice, factors of encouragement and discouragement in career plans, the importance of career planning, and the people approached for help in career plans. Most of the grade 12 students reported having a specific plan and having reached a stage of commitment and decision-making (39.6%) or were deciding between two plans (42.3%). The minority (12.5%) of students were unsure of their destination after high school, but had started to plan or didn't know or do not have career plans (5.5%).

When asked what they will most likely be doing in the year after they leave high school, students were instructed to indicate as many options as apply to them; in other words, the survey gave students the opportunity to pick multiple options beyond high school. The majority reported the goal of full-time studies at a university or college or technical institute (49.1%), or part-time studies (15.6%), as well as plans for other types of training (8.4%). Therefore, 73.1% of these grade 12 students reported a plan to enter post-secondary education or training. Another 4.8% of the students planed to continue their education by returning to high school. The option of full time work (26.8%) and part-time work (29%) also was reported. Lastly (17.7%) indicated they would be travelling in the year after high school.

In a question that asked "If you had to start work assuming the proper education or training, what work would you choose?" the student answers were organized according to the major occupational categories of the National Occupational Classification Index of Titles or (NOC) codes (Employment and Immigration Canada, 1993). Of interest is the complexity and range of occupations identified by the respondents. The greatest expressed preference was for occupations in education and social services (17.0%), followed by health professions (15.0%). The next most frequent response was technology/health/sciences (14.7%) followed by natural and applied science (6.6%). A notable finding was the number of students who chose skilled trades (9.3%). These results represent an increase from the figure of 4% selecting apprenticeship trades reported by Lowe, Krahn, and Bowlby (1997). Other major categories of career choice were management (6.3%) and business/finance (5.8%), paraprofessions, which include photography, coaching, and working with people (6.0%), and occupations in the field of culture and fine arts (5.0%). A minority (2%) reported unskilled occupations. Essentially, the occupational choice results indicate that 79.5 % of the students plan work that requires post-secondary education or training. Yet, a number of students (7.6%) did not indicate an occupational choice or provided a response such as "I do not know" or "Not a clue" to the question of occupational choice, assuming they had the proper education or training.

In an open-ended question on why they would choose that kind of work, the themes were coded and the percentage of each coded theme was calculated. There were seven main themes that emerged. The first theme revolved around interests (24.9%) and included responses such as: "Involves things I like to do", "It's what I want to do/like" and the identification of likes or interests including math, the outdoors, teaching, sports, writing, working with my hands, design, and electronics. Another major theme was working style (21.7%), which included responses such as: . "like working with children/teens", "enjoy working/communicating with people" and other more specific responses that included "challenging", "independence", "exciting", and "solving problems". Of importance to the respondents was a knowledge of job requirements or labour markets (20.5%), skills and talents (12.6%) and the connection between career and personal passions (11.0%). This is a group of students who describe career as more than earning an income and view career as the expression of interests, talents, and passions.

In a question, which asked about factors of encouragement in career, the top six themes identified included: adequate income or making money to afford wants and needs (27.1%), the importance of success in career and work satisfaction (21.0%), enjoyment and a sense of being involved in work (10.8 %), a future sense or life role (9%) and personal strength awareness (6.8%). The results also include students (9%) who chose not to answer the question on factors of encouragement.

Data were also gathered on seven themes relating to discouragement for career. The three major themes were the nature of working conditions (24.8%), the expressed difficulty of post-secondary training (24.4%), and personal factors of success in career (22.0%) where the respondents identified factors such as "finding work/where I will work", "not finding a job that I love/like/enjoy", "patience /fear of mistakes/taking risks, and "not succeeding/being able to do it." Other themes of discouragement were work schedules/long hours/work every day at the same time (5.7%) and completing the training and not finding a good job/job security /future job demand (4.8%).

In a question on the importance of career planning, the students regarded career planning as "quite important" (39.9%) or "very important" (34.8%). Therefore 74.7% of students view career planning to be exceedingly important in the grade 12 year. In a question on what would be most helpful in your career planning, the need for post-secondary information was reconfirmed by a majority of these students (27.6%). The next greatest reported need was career information (19.7%), specific labour market information (9 %) and how to be successful in high school (5.9%). Finally, the need for individual career counselling in the high school setting is reported by students (5.5%).

The results of a question asking students which people they were most comfortable in approaching for help with career planning, ranked parents highest (43.9%), school counsellors next (15.8%), followed by someone working in the field (13.5%).

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Career Help

The CCNS yielded data on high school career development services, high school career education and resources, and confidence in future education and career. The CCNS questions instructed respondents to rate each item on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 0 = Don't Know, 1 = Not at All Helpful, 2 = Somewhat Helpful, 3 = Quite Helpful, and 4 = Very Helpful.

The grade 12 students were asked to rate the potential helpfulness of 12 possible high school career planning services. All the results indicated a high ranking or high perceived importance of all services with mean scores between 2.58 and 3.40. The two items regarded as most helpful pertained to self-understanding or pursuing things I am passionate about (3.40), and understanding my interests and abilities (3.28). Information needs, including knowing about post-secondary finances (3.17) and post-secondary institutions (3.14) is the next priority of need. Next were the "people resources" or relational needs of getting support for my career plans (3.04) and help in planning the next steps in career (2.98). The last categories included information about different occupations (2.96) and the world of work (2.95) and help with choosing between two or more occupational options (2.58). Information about opportunities within the community (2.37) and being convinced of the importance career plans (2.22) were in the lowest category of needs. In summary, many facets of career planning services receive strong affirmation by these grade 12 students.

The students also were asked to rate how helpful specific high school and community career education programs and resources were in their career planning. The mean scores for all 18 educational resources were low or only "Somewhat Helpful" to career planning. The students gave the highest ranking to the Career and Life Management (CALM) course (1.91), followed by career counselling (1.86), written materials (1.76), work experience (1.75), and Internet sites (1.74). These results also suggest the Career and Technology Studies (CTS) course (1.66), computer programs (1.49), school career information centers (1.32), career fairs (1.31) interest inventories (.98), career planning workshops (.98), and videos (.85) were less helpful. The community resources received the lowest rankings for example job shadowing (.88), career library outside school (.79) the local library (.76) and community agencies (.70).

In a question on student confidence in the next few years of their life, the results suggest that these students are confident they will find the occupation they love to do (quite likely 40.7%; very likely 27.8%), confident in getting the education and training they need (quite likely 40.8%, very likely 38.8%), and confident in working in the occupation they have chosen (quite likely 43.3%, very likely 30.8%). This appears to be a motivated group of grade 12 students, who have a positive sense of career.

Discussion

The CCNS is a student needs assessment study, with the goal of understanding student priorities for the delivery of career education programs. The results provide a snapshot of the process, relationships, programs, resources, and services for the transition needs of the grade 12 students. Students are still largely excluded from the decision-making process that translates the research data into program objectives and strategies (Collins, 1998).

The results of this study profile grade 12 students who have career plans and value the resources, both people and informational, that support transition to post-secondary or work. The large majority (73.1%) of participants plan post-secondary education or training and report a wide range of occupational choices. 74.7% of the students view career planning as "very or quite important" and are receptive to career information. Career development public policy recommends that career development activities take place in the high school setting (Team Canada, 2000). The results of this research confirm the importance of having career education programs in high schools since few of the students reported accessing these services within the community setting.

"A Comprehensive Career Development System (CCDS) asks schools and school systems to establish a developmental, co-ordinated, systematic approach to help every student make career plans and make a successful transition into the workplace or post-secondary programs" (Alberta Learning, 2000, p.3). In this study, the majority of the grade 12 students stated that they would find many high school career development services to be helpful at this time in their life. Specifically the priorities they identified are finding ways to pursue things that I am passionate

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about, understanding interests and abilities, obtaining information on financial help for continuing my education, and information about post-secondary education.

When asked to rate 18 high school career education resources, the students indicated that all were available, but were not fully helpful to career planning. Efficacy of career development services suggests the need for ongoing modification of existing services and reevaluation of programs as a critical practice (Dedmond, 1996; Schultz, 1995). The results of the CCNS provide succinct client feedback. The specific recommendation on delivery and utilization of high school career education resources should be examined and based on this student feedback, adjustments should be made to programs.

The results substantiate the need for specialized post-secondary counselling. Post-secondary programs must provide information on admissions, programs, and specialized transition counselling for their prospective students (Arthur and Hiebert, 1996). Financial concerns rank highly and these students request information regarding options.

This research identifies the high priority of parents in student career plans. Consequently, parents should be kept up to date on high school career development resources.

The students reported availability but limited use of Internet sites. Considering the extensive information on career development Internet sites, these sites must be marketed to educators and students.

Listening to students, who are the consumers of career development services represents pragmatism in the delivery of exemplary programs. Students should be active participants in influencing public policy on high school career development.

Limitations of the Study

The research was conducted in a rural area, in the province of Alberta, in centers with populations of 500-75 000 people. Although these results are valid, based on the large number of subjects, it can be stated that these results may not be generalized to grade 12 students beyond Southern Alberta.

The time of year for the administration of this study, May, could possibly influence on the resultsin that, by May, grade 12 students might be clearer about their career plans, than they would be in September.

The CCNS is a broad survey instrument. This study is based on student self-reports and therefore the results reflect the respondents' perceptions of reality at that moment in time. The data collected do not allow for elaboration, personalization, or reflection on individual questions. Questions on the use and helpfulness of career portfolios were not presented in the CCNS questionnaire, despite the success of some school jurisdictions with this learning tool.

Areas of Future Research

Research must continue on the delivery and efficacy of recent career education initiatives in high schools. The transition anxieties exhibited by students regarding programs and course selection in post-secondary programs must receive additional research attention. Previous research has proposed the importance of support in propelling developmental progress and in achieving career identity (Blustein, Prezioso, and Schultheiss, 1995). It therefore seems important to design research, which examines the influence of relational support. Attention must be also given to the 10% of the students in this study who were non-responsive to questions on career plans. Finally, given the student's expressed need for help from someone working in the field and for work experience programs, it seems valuable to conduct research on the students who have participated in these programs.

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Toi Deetra Thompson
FAX: 1-336-334-4116

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Signature: Kerry Bernes	Printed Name/Position/Title: Dr. Kerry Bernes, Associate Professor
Organization/Address: University of Lethbridge, 35 MT. Rundle Blvd W. Lethbridge, AB, Canada T1K 7J2	Telephone: (403) 381-1703 FAX: (403) 381-1725
	E-Mail Address: Kerry.bernes@uleth.ca Date: NOV 15/03

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